

Introduction to the General Epistles and the Book of James

Welcome to the General Epistles	Protestants refer to Hebrews (which we've already done), James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude as "General Epistles." Catholics, however, refer to them as the "Catholic Epistles." The reason for this has nothing to do with Protestant vs Catholic. It's because the word Catholic means "general."
What is a General Epistle?	Most of Paul's letters were to specific churches. Sure, they were passed around and shared with other churches. But the intended audience was specific. On the other hand, the General Epistles were written to be shared with Christians in general, thus the reason for "General Epistles." Peter, for example, writes "to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout..." (1 Pet. 1:1).
Who Was James?	When exploring the Book of James, one immediate question usually comes to people's minds: Which James? Was it James, the son of Zebedee? He was the brother of John who was also an apostle who was martyred around 44 AD (Acts 12:2). Or was it James, the brother of Jesus. Though he was not an apostle, we know that he became a leader in the early church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). From the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, we also know he was martyred around 62 AD. He also refers to James, the writer, as "the Lord's Brother."
The Issue with James	When you read Paul and James side by side, you will notice an immediate contrast in style, theological emphasis. Paul, for example, writes "it is by grace you have been saved through faith, not by works" (Eph 2:8-9). On the other hand, James writes "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). It is for this reason that Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation called it "a right strawy epistle." For he couldn't see salvation by grace through faith alone it.
The Answer is Context	Context helps a lot with interpreting the Bible, the conflict between James and Paul especially. Paul's audience in Ephesians is both Jewish and Gentle Christians in a metropolitan, pagan, Roman city. They needed to know Jesus saved them by his grace, regardless of what they did (Gentiles) or didn't (Jews) do. On the other hand, James' audience is to Jewish Christians: "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (James 1:1). To them, he was contrasting, practically speaking, faith that "works" with faith that doesn't "work."
The Key to James	James is the most practical book in the New Testament. He's very straightforward and easy to understand. Reason being, he uses a lot of repetition, strings together moral admonitions, and makes sure to apply it to his audience.
Key Verses	"All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:7-8).
Structure	James consists of two parts. Chapter 1 is the first part, where James introduces Jesus and the wisdom he offers. Chapters 2-5 is the second part. It contains 12 teachings and an encouragement for perseverance in prayer.

Part One: Jesus and the Wisdom He Offers (Ch. 1)

1. **Jesus viewed trials through a joyful lens. So should we.**
 - a. ² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (1:2-4)
2. **Jesus is a generous giver. We should believe he is.**
 - a. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. (1:5-8)
3. **Jesus is a tester through trials. Not a tempter through sin.**
 - a. ¹³ When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (1:13-15)
4. **By the way, don't forget Jesus is a generous giver.**
 - a. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. (1:17-18)
5. **Jesus knows the essence of pure religion. We should take him seriously.**
 - a. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (1:26-27)

Part Two: 12 Teachings and an Encouragement in Prayer (Chapters 2-5)

****Important here is the emphasis of 12.** He wrote to the “12 tribes scattered abroad.” Now 12 teachings follow. 12 is the number of divine government in the Bible. These 12 teachings form a “constitution” of sorts.

1. A Teaching About Favoritism (2:1-13)

- a. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers (2:9).

2. A Teaching About Faith and Works (2:14-26)

- a. ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (2:26).

3. A Teaching About the Tongue (3:1-12)

- a. ⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. (3:9-10)

4. A Teaching About Wisdom from Below (3:13-16)

- a. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (3:16)

5. A Teaching About Wisdom from Above (3:17-18)

- a. ¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (3:16-18)

6. A Teaching About What Causes Fights and Quarrels Among You (4:1-6)

- a. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (4:1-3)

7. A Teaching About Submitting to God (4:7-10)

- a. ⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (4:7-8)

8. A Teaching About Slander (4:11-12)

- a. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (4:12)

9. A Teaching About Tomorrow (4:13-15)

- a. You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.” (4:14-15)

10. A Teaching About Boasting (4:16-17)

- a. ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them (4:16-17)

11. A Teaching About Wealthy Oppressors (5:1-6)

- a. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. (5:3-4)

12. A Teaching About Patience in Suffering (5:7-12)

- a. ⁷Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

****An Encouragement About Prayer Concludes the Book (5:13-19) —** Elijah prayed. When he did, the heavens gave rain...Amen.